

Draft Environmental Assessment

North Shore Wildlife Management Area Proposed Addition



November 2015



***Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks***

Executive Summary

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Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to purchase approximately 76.7 acres of farmland and wetlands located along the north shore of Flathead Lake about 4.5 miles east of the community of Somers. Funding for the project would be provided by the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act.

The primary purpose of the proposed land acquisition is to protect and manage this land to restore or improve natural riparian/wetland habitats, to continue annual crop production to benefit resident and migratory waterfowl, to improve and maintain habitat for other wildlife, and to provide opportunities for seasonal and compatible public recreation. Other benefits of this project include protecting ground water, surface water, and wetlands on or near Flathead Lake, which will help improve or maintain the high water quality of Flathead Lake for benefits of aquatic life and fish and wildlife habitat.

FWP proposes to incorporate this parcel into FWP's wildlife management area program and it would become part of the existing North Shore Wildlife Management Area (North Shore WMA). The proposed Management Plan is included as part of the draft environmental assessment (EA).

This property borders to the west the 189-acre North Shore Wildlife Management Area that FWP acquired in 2013 which is adjacent to the 160-acre North Shore State Park/Wildlife Management Area that FWP acquired in 2008. It also borders to the east the access road to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Flathead Lake Waterfowl Production Area.

The public comment period for this draft EA will extend for 30 days beginning November 6, 2015. Written **comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., December 5, 2015**, and can be mailed to: North Shore WMA Proposed Addition; Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; 490 N. Meridian Road; Kalispell, MT 59901 or sent by e-mail to: Nancy Ivy at nivy@mt.gov.

FWP will hold a project presentation/public hearing on November 24, 2015 beginning at 6:30 pm at the Somers Middle School located at 315 School Addition Road, Somers, MT. The public meeting will begin with an approximately brief project overview followed by a formal public hearing.

Copies of this EA will be available for public review at FWP Region One headquarters in Kalispell; the Flathead County Libraries in Bigfork, Lakeside, and Kalispell; the Montana State Library in Helena; and on the FWP web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov>) under Public Notices.

Table of Contents

1.0 Purpose of and Need for Action	1
1.1 Proposed Action	1
1.2 Justification	4
1.3 Objectives of Proposed Action	6
1.4 Location	6
1.5 Future Management of Property	6
1.6 Property Improvements	6
1.7 Operations and Maintenance	7
1.8 Authority	7
1.9 Relevant Plans and Overlapping Jurisdictions	8
1.10 Decision to be Made	9
2.0 Alternatives	9
2.1 Alternative A – Proposed Action - Acquisition	9
2.2 Alternative B – No Action and No Conservation Easement	9
3.0 Affected Environment	9
3.1 Habitat	9
3.2 Terrestrial Species	11
3.3 Fisheries Species and Water Resources	12
3.4 Recreation Opportunities	13
3.5 Public Access	13
3.6 Buildings and Other Improvements	13
4.0 Predicted Environmental Consequences	13
4.1 Physical Environment	13
4.1.1 Land Resources	13
4.1.2 Air Quality	14
4.1.3 Water Resources	14
4.1.4 Vegetation	14
4.1.5 Fish and Wildlife Resources	15
4.2 Human Environment	16
4.2.1 Noise and Utilities	16
4.2.2 Land Use	17
4.2.3 Risk and Health Hazard	18
4.2.4 Aesthetics and Recreation	18
4.2.5 Public Services, taxes and Community Impacts	19
4.2.6 Cultural and Historic Resources	20
4.3 Cumulative Effects	20
5.0 Need for an Environmental Impact Statement	20

6.0 Public Participation	20
6.1 Public Involvement	20
6.2 Comment Period	21
6.3 Approximate Timeline of Events	21
6.4 Offices/Programs Contributing to the Document	21
7.0 EA Preparation	21
References	22
Appendix	23
A. Draft Proposed Management Plan	23

1.0 Purpose of and Need for Action

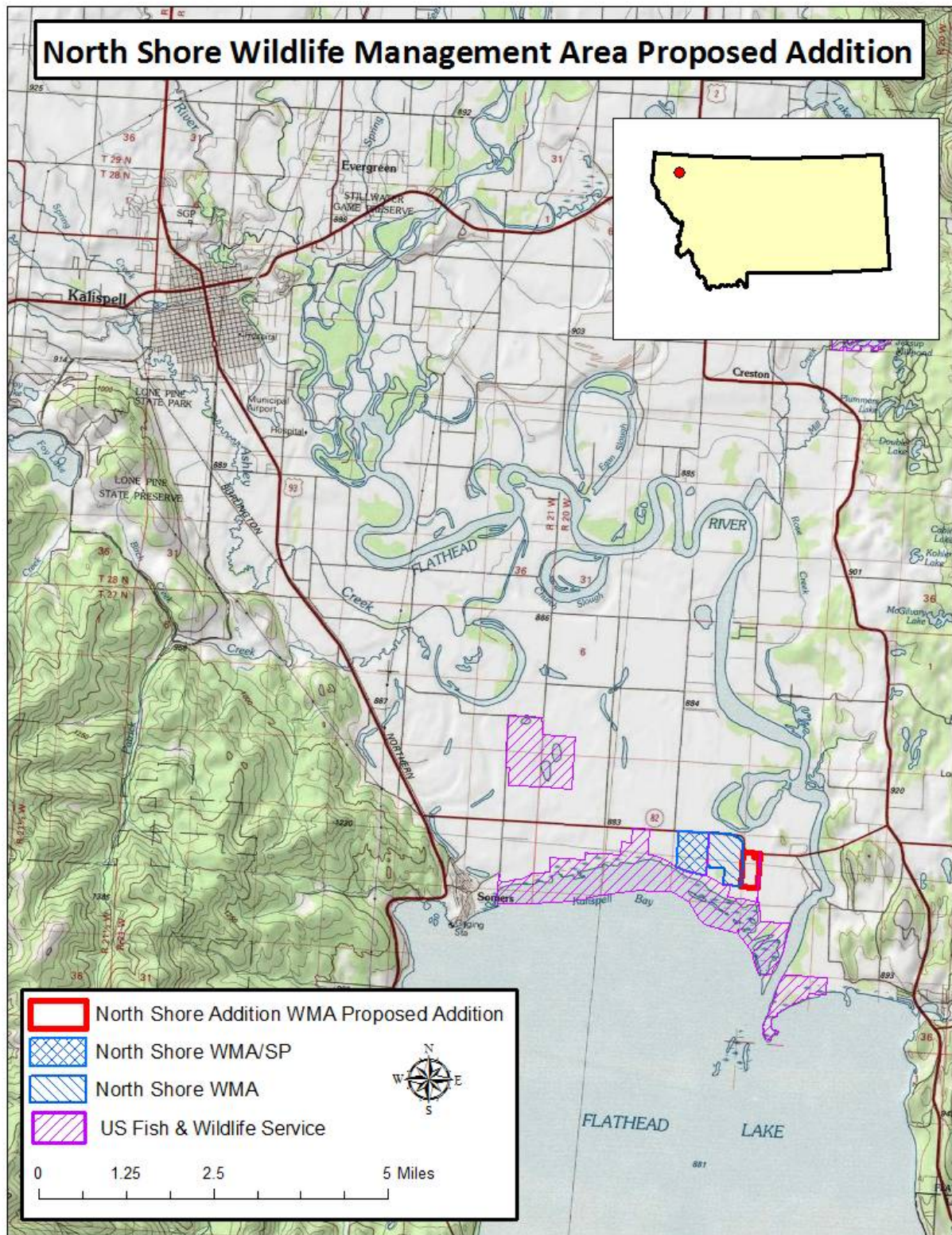
1.1 Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to purchase approximately 76.7 acres of farmland and wetlands located along the north shore of Flathead Lake about 4.5 miles east of the community of Somers (Figures 1 & 2). Funding for the project would be provided by the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act.

The primary purpose of the proposed land acquisition is to protect and manage this land to restore or improve natural riparian/wetland habitats, to continue annual crop production to benefit resident and migratory waterfowl, to improve and maintain habitat for other wildlife, and to provide opportunities for seasonal and compatible public recreation. Other benefits of this project include protecting ground water, surface water, and wetlands on or near Flathead Lake, which will help improve or maintain the high water quality of Flathead Lake for benefits of aquatic life and fish and wildlife habitat.

To the west, the property is adjacent to the 189-acre North Shore Wildlife Management Area (WMA) that FWP acquired in 2013 which is adjacent to the 160-acre North Shore State Park/Wildlife Management Area (SP/WMA) that FWP acquired in 2008. This proposed acquisition also borders the access road to the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) Flathead Lake Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) to the east.

FWP proposes to incorporate this parcel into FWP's wildlife management program and it would become part of the existing North Shore Wildlife Management Area (North Shore WMA). The landowner has agreed to sell this parcel for approximately \$489,000, which is 25% below the appraised value of \$652,000. The proposed Management Plan is included as part of the draft environmental assessment (EA). FWP has agreed to accept an existing farm lease on the property through 2016 as part of the acquisition. In exchange for this lease, the lessee will continue to manage weeds and provide food/cover plots for migratory birds. In 2017, FWP will advertise for bids on the farmland portion of the property consistent with the proposed Management Plan.



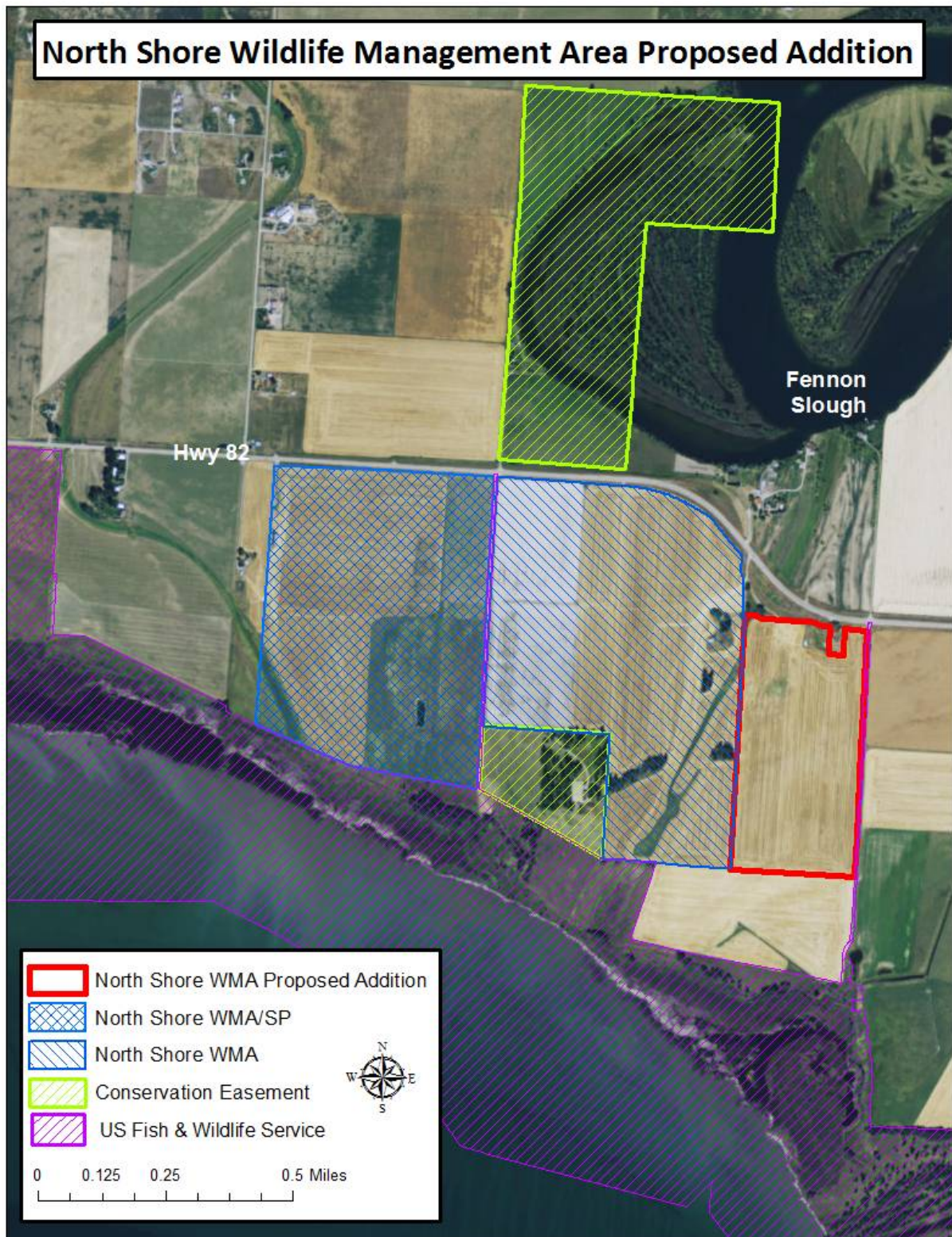


Figure 2. Aerial view of the proposed acquisition and adjoining landownership along Flathead's Lake north shore and Highway 82.

1.2 Justification

Most of the proposed land acquisition overlies a water table that varies between two feet to ten feet from the surface (USGS monitoring wells on the Waterfowl Production Area west of the WMA). The western portion of property contains a small wetland and the entire property has areas that are flooded seasonally (Figure 3). High ground water and seasonal flooding also occur on properties all along the north shore of Flathead Lake. FWP believes there is a high potential to restore functional seasonal or permanent wetlands in areas of the entire North Shore WMA complex, as well as in this proposed addition, to increase the habitat value of the area for the thousands of migratory waterfowl as well as other resident bird and wildlife species (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Aerial view of the property (Parcel #1) in 2014 showing areas that have surface water throughout the spring and early summer.

Five years of Flathead Valley spring waterfowl surveys by FWP and partners, discussions with local farmers, as well as FWP's own experience with farming on the adjacent North Shore SP/WMA and North Shore WMA indicate that portions of productive croplands in the Flathead Valley, particularly those fields that often flood in the spring, provide an extremely important food resource to thousands of migratory waterfowl such as tundra and trumpeter swans, Canada geese, northern pintails, mallards, and American wigeon (Figure 4). Spring migrants need high quality forage during migration to arrive in nesting areas in good shape for reproduction. The Flathead's valley farms and wetlands comprise an important stopover area for many waterfowl species. During the fall, these same croplands also provide an important food resource for waterfowl species that migrate back through the Flathead Valley. The valley's productive croplands combined with riparian/wetland habitats provide important habitat for other species including upland game birds and white-tailed deer.

Due to the presence of Flathead Lake and the complexity of habitats across the north shore, this area supports a high number and diverse species of birds (Figure 4). Based on data collected by the American Bird Conservancy and local expert birders, Montana Audubon designated the north shore as an Important Bird Area in 2009. Over 229 species have been recorded for the general north shore area, of which 172 are regulars.



Figure 4. *Migratory waterfowl foraging on flooded fields and residual barley hay in 2012 on the North Shore SP/WMA in 2011.*

Important bird species of special concern that regularly occur in this area include nesting and wintering bald eagles and a recovering population of trumpeter swans. Additionally, this project falls within the Flathead River to Lake Initiative focus area. The River to Lake Initiative is a collaborative partnership with landowners, agencies, and nongovernmental organizations working to voluntarily conserve and restore the lands along the Flathead River mainstem from Columbia Falls south to Flathead Lake and along the north shore of Flathead Lake.



Figure 5. *Overview of diversity of wetland and bird habitat along the north shore of Flathead Lake from Somers, Montana.*

The existing Flathead Lake and nearby Blasdel WPAs and North Shore SP/WMA and North Shore WMA provide some of the only accessible waterfowl and upland game bird hunting in Flathead Valley. The need to maintain habitat integrity of mixed agricultural use and riparian/wetlands along the Flathead River and Flathead Lake are a priority for FWP.

1.3 Objectives of Proposed Action (acquisition and future management)

- a. Conserve, maintain, restore, and enhance riparian/wetland habitats to maintain or improve ecological functions and provide additional wildlife habitat and species benefits.
- b. Maintain/enhance and potentially expand native upland habitat with native understory for nesting birds.
- c. Protect the property's surface and ground water to benefit water quality in Flathead Lake and on-site aquatic ecosystems.
- d. Use/manage agricultural lands in a manner that provides a variety of wildlife habitats and improves wetlands or water quality.
- e. Maintain, to FWP's best ability, all heritage and culturally important resources identified by the State Historic Preservation Office, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, or other professional entities.
- f. Allow seasonal public hunting, birdwatching, and other consistent uses.
- g. Provide educational/research opportunities consistent with the above objectives that do not negatively impact wildlife resources, habitat values, historical or cultural resources, or other related resource management activities.
- h. Be a "good neighbor" to adjoining properties and neighboring communities and contribute to the local economy.

1.4 Location

The property is located in Flathead County in T27N, R20W in Section 22 south of Montana Highway 82, about 3/4 mile west of Sportsman's Bridge between the communities of Somers and Bigfork. It is located about 9 miles southeast of Kalispell (Figures 1 and 2).

1.5 Future Management of the Property

Management of the proposed land acquisition will be consistent with the two adjoining WMAs as well as the USFWS WPA. Appendix A contains the proposed Management Plan for this acquisition.

1.6 Property Improvements

This property contains one 10'x12' wood frame shed and one 10'x16' pole shed which has two sets of corrals attached to it.

FWP contracted with wetland restoration professionals to develop a riparian/wetland and upland restoration plan for the existing North Shore SP/WMA, the North Shore WMA, and this proposed acquisition property (Figure 6). FWP will consider implementing this plan, or something similar, in the future once funding and appropriate permissions are secured. Any restoration activities on this or the other WMA parcels will be the subject of a separate environmental review process.

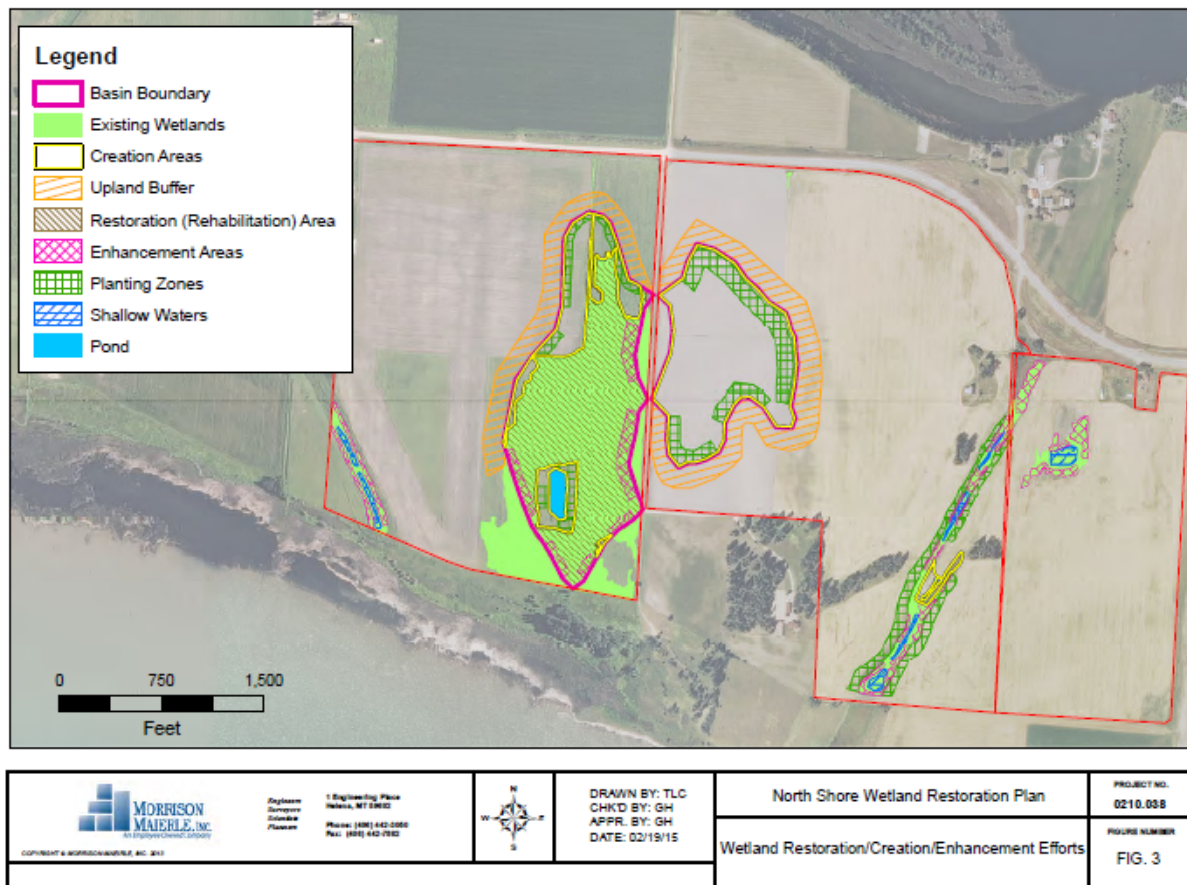


Figure 6. Wetland and upland restoration plan developed by Morrison-Maierle, Inc. in 2015 for the North Shore SP/WMA, North Shore WMA, and the proposed acquisition property.

1.7 Operations and Maintenance

Noxious weeds would be managed by the farm lessee and FWP staff. Future lessee would provide wildlife forage/habitat as agreed upon in lease agreements. FWP wildlife management program would cover annual property taxes and general annual property administration and maintenance costs, which are expected to be about \$1,200/year including property taxes that are currently approximately \$700/year.

1.8 Authority

The following laws and rules are applicable to the proposed action:

FWP has the authority to purchase lands (MCA 87-1-209) that are suitable for game, bird, fish, or fur-bearing animal restoration, propagation, or protection; for public hunting, fishing, or trapping areas; and for state parks and outdoor recreation.

1.9 Relevant Plans and Overlapping Jurisdictions

2007 Flathead County Growth Plan: The Growth Policy is a comprehensive planning document that provides guidance to all other plans and regulations administered by the county. It applies to all of Flathead County, excepting the incorporated cities of Kalispell, Whitefish, and Columbia Falls, and their respective interlocal agreement areas, http://www.flathead.mt.gov/planning_zoning/growthpolicy2012.php.

Goals identified in the 2012 Flathead County Growth Policy that are assisted by this project are:

- 1) Land Uses
 - a. G.9: Define, identify, and list desirable characteristics of open space preservation.
 - b. G.11: Protection of scenic resources available to both residents and visitors.
- 2) Natural Resources
 - a. G.35: Protect and preserve water resources within the Flathead watershed for the benefit of current residents and future generations.
 - b. G.36: Protect water quality in lakes, rivers, aquifers, and streams from existing and potential pollution sources.
 - c. G.38: Preserve and protect floodplains to ensure the safety of residents' flood hazards and to prevent the degradation of water quality and wildlife habitat.
 - d. G.39: Preserve and protect wetlands and riparian areas to prevent the degradation of natural resources, including and not limited to water quality and critical wildlife habitat.
 - e. G.40: Protect sensitive areas over shallow aquifers.
 - f. G.41: Promote the preservation of critical fish and wildlife habitat and preserve the area's unique outdoor amenities and quality of life.

2008 FWP North Shore State Park/Wildlife Management Area and the 2013 FWP North Shore Wildlife Management Area: The 2008 and 2013 Management Plans for the parcels west of the proposed land acquisition provide a description of the purpose, objectives, and management strategies for the North Shore SP/WMA and the North Shore WMA. The management of this proposed addition would be incorporated into and compatible with management of the North Shore WMA and North Shore SP/WMA as well as with the adjoining USFWS Waterfowl Production Area.

Montana Audubon Important Bird Area Program: Due to documented high bird numbers and diversity, Flathead Lake's entire north shore was designated an Important Bird Area (IBA) by the Montana Audubon Society in 2009. The IBA's Program is a global effort to identify and conserve areas that are vital to birds and other biodiversity. By working with Audubon chapters, landowners, public agencies, community groups, and other nonprofits, Audubon endeavors to interest and activate a broad network of supporters to ensure that all IBAs are properly managed and conserved.

2010 Montana Bald Eagle Management Guidelines - An Addendum to the 1994 Montana Bald Eagle Management Plan: Bald eagles are known to nest near the proposed project area. The Management Guidelines were prepared in cooperation with the Montana Bald Eagle Working Group to provide recommendations for protecting bald eagle habitat and reducing the risk of

potential violations of the federal Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, <http://MFWP.mt.gov/fwpDoc.html?id=44181>.

Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA):

FWP has prepared this EA in part to meet the public and environmental review requirements under the MEPA.

1.10 Decision to be Made

The decision that must be made is whether FWP *should move forward with the proposed purchase of the 76-acre parcel and manage this property as part of the North Shore WMA according to the draft Management Plan for this parcel (Appendix A)*. Following completion of the draft EA and public comment period, the FWP Region One supervisor will issue a decision notice that makes a recommendation to the Fish and Wildlife Commission on a course of action. This course of action could be either the Proposed Action or the No-Action Alternative or an action that is within the scope of the analyzed alternatives.

As with other FWP conservation projects that involve land interests, the Fish and Wildlife Commission and the State Board of Land Commissioners would make the final decisions. This draft EA and the comments FWP receives are part of the decision-making process.

2.0 Alternatives

2.1 Alternative A: Proposed Action - Acquisition of the Proposed North Shore WMA Property

FWP would purchase the property using Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act funding and manage the property for the benefit of fish and wildlife values as a wildlife management area according to the draft Management Plan (Appendix A).

2.2 Alternative B: No Action

The No-Action Alternative for this project is described as FWP not purchasing the 76-acre parcel. The landowner would likely sell the property with existing covenants, which allow subdivision into 20 acre parcels.

3.0 Affected Environment

3.1 Habitat

Nearly all of the property is currently used as cropland (approximately 74 acres) and has been in agricultural production since the early 1900s (peas, wheat, barley, canola, and some livestock). Only about 1 acre is seasonally wet. Another 1 acre contains one 10'x12' wood frame shed and one 10'x16' pole shed which has two sets of corrals attached to it (Figure 7). Due to the historical and current use as agricultural land, sensitive or threatened plant species are not likely to exist on the property.

High ground water dominates this area due to low and flat topography and is influenced by Flathead Lake and Flathead River. The 2,370-acre USFWS Waterfowl Production Area contains

extensive wetlands and stands of aspen, cottonwood, and ponderosa pine and comprises the vegetated shoreline of Flathead Lake for about 6 contiguous miles. The shallows, wetlands, and seasonal mudflats along the Flathead Lake WPA provide important foraging and resting areas for thousands of migratory birds moving through intermountain valleys of the Northern Rockies during spring and fall. The proposed land acquisition also provides resting and foraging habitat for migratory birds, and it provides an important nondeveloped buffer for Flathead Lake.



Figure 7. The North Shore WMA proposed addition consisting of mostly agricultural land, one small seasonally wet area, and one area that contains two sheds and two corrals.

The majority of the surrounding private lands are used for hay and crop production. However, high density developments exist along the WPA boundary on the east side of the Flathead River and in and around Somers, with scattered, increasing commercial and residential development along Highway 82.

The north shore of Flathead Lake is also an important area of fish and wildlife habitat, open space, excellent views, seasonal recreation, and connectivity across the Flathead Valley. In addition to high numbers of birds, landowners have reported elk, mountain lions, and bears in

this area. With the existing rural nature of this land, plus the protected areas, there is a potential link or path for wildlife moving between the Swan and Salish Mountains.

There are small areas of noxious weeds (primarily Canadian thistle and spotted knapweed) within the property.

3.2 Terrestrial Species

Species of Special Concern: There are 13 Species of Concern that likely occur or have the potential to occur on the proposed land acquisition (Table 1).

Table 1. List of Species of Special Concern that might occur on the proposed land acquisition or in the immediate vicinity.

Golden Eagle	Lewis's Woodpecker
Great Blue Heron	Peregrine Falcon
American Bittern	Great Gray Owl
Brown Creeper	Veery
Trumpeter Swan	Bobolink
Black Tern	Hoary Bat
Pileated Woodpecker	

Birds: Due to documented high bird numbers and diversity, Flathead Lake's entire north shore was designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by the Montana Audubon Society in 2009. Spring waterfowl counts on this and nearby properties and along Flathead Lake shoreline include peak single-day counts of over 10,000-15,000 northern pintail, American wigeon, mallard, Canada goose, and tundra and trumpeter swan. Other abundant migrants that use the flooded agricultural fields include green-winged teal, northern shovelers, cinnamon teal, and several species of shorebirds, such as greater yellowlegs and various sandpipers. Overall, a minimum of 229 bird species are known to occur within the IBA, and 172 of these are regular, common, or abundant seasonally.

The lake, shoreline, wetlands, open space, croplands, and grasslands, along with presence of migratory waterfowl, upland game birds, and small mammal populations, create excellent habitat for a high diversity and number of wintering/migrating raptors such as snowy owl, short-eared owl, ruff-legged hawk, northern harrier, red-tailed hawk, merlin, peregrine and prairie falcon, kestrel, sharp-shinned hawk, and golden and bald eagles. Nesting raptors include northern harrier, red-tailed hawk, osprey, and bald eagle.

The north shore of Flathead Lake is important to ring-necked pheasants, wild turkey, and gray partridge, and these species are actively hunted throughout the valley where the public can get access. On the adjoining North Shore WMA, the mature ponderosa pine stands may support pileated woodpecker and brown creeper, and the riparian/wetlands support a number of nesting passerines, including yellow warbler, McGillvary's warbler, yellow-headed and red-winged blackbirds, marsh wrens, and common yellow-throat.

Bald eagles are considered a Special Status Species. There are four known and currently active bald eagle nesting territories along the north shore of Flathead Lake; two are located between the

Flathead River and Somers and two nests east of Flathead River. The federal WPA is currently closed from March 1 to July 15 each year to provide secure resting and nesting habitat for waterfowl, and this also helps provide security to nesting bald eagles. Bald eagles use the north shore area year-round, feeding on fish, waterfowl, rodents, and occasional animals that have been hit by vehicles along Highway 82.

Mammals: Listed by the USFWS as threatened and a Tier 1 mammal species, grizzly bears are known to frequent the Flathead Valley river sloughs and wetlands in the spring and fall, utilizing wetlands, chokecherries, and hawthorn berries. FWP has radio telemetry locations of several bears taking late summer and fall excursions into the valley along the Flathead River not far from the proposed acquisition.

The adjacent North Shore WMA property includes important year-round habitat for white-tailed deer and occasional habitat for black bears, mountain lions, and elk that may periodically pass through the area. Numerous species of small mammals that use this area would include coyote, red fox, raccoons, skunks, Columbian ground squirrels, western pocket gophers, voles, and mice. No inventories of bats have been undertaken to date, but several different species are likely to feed above the property at night and some may roost in the trees and barn on the adjoining WMA. Semi-aquatic furbearers found along the north shore include muskrats, river otter, beaver, and mink.

Flathead Lake's north shore is also an important area of connectivity across the Flathead Valley, linking much larger blocks of habitat in the Swan and Salish Mountains. Over the years, landowners along the north shore have reported elk, mountain lions, and bears moving through this area.

Amphibians: Western toad, a Species of Special Concern, may occur or have the potential to occur on the property's seasonal wetlands. Long-toed salamanders may also be present. Northern leopard frogs have been extirpated from the Flathead Valley, but occurred here in the past. This property, or the adjoining FWP parcels, may be a place for potential northern leopard frog reintroduction in the future.

Invertebrates: There are also many species of dragon/damselfly listed as potential species of special concern that may also occur on the proposed project lands.

3.3 Fisheries Species and Water Resources

Important fish species in Flathead Lake include bull trout, a species listed as threatened under Endangered Species Act. The north shore of the lake is an important summer feeding area for bull trout that are drawn to this area when the yellow perch spawn. Flathead Lake also supports year-round habitat for westslope cutthroat trout and pygmy whitefish, both species of special concern. Other native fish that use Flathead Lake include mountain whitefish, northern pike minnow, and largescale sucker. Flathead Lake also supports numerous nonnative sport fish including lake trout, Lake Superior whitefish, yellow perch, and northern pike.

There are no recorded water rights for this property. About 50% of property is within the 500-year floodplain according to the FEMA's 2015 Flood Insurance Rate Map.

3.4 Recreation Opportunities

Current public recreation on the property is through landowner permission only. The proposed project is near the USFWS Flathead Lake WPA (one of the access roads abuts this property), which provides recreation seasonally for hiking and approximately 1,000 hunter days each fall, with much of the use occurring at the start of the waterfowl and upland game bird seasons. The WPA is also used for summer, fall, and winter birdwatching, winter shoreline walking, and winter X-country skiing. The WPA is closed to public use from March 1 to July 15 annually and FWP's adjacent North Shore WMA and North Shore SP/WMA have a similar closure.

3.5 Public Access

Public access would be managed from the parking area of the adjoining North Shore WMA or available from the Flathead Lake WPA, and the property would be open to the public for hunting during the fall and other wildlife-related activities from July 16 to the end of February each year. More details about public uses are described in the attached draft Management Plan.

3.6 Buildings and Other Improvements

There are no residences on this property, but there are one 10'x12' wood frame shed and one 10'x16' pole shed which has two sets of corrals attached to it. A one-acre residential property is surrounded by this property on three sides at its northern end and the property to the south is private agricultural land. There are public lands on two boundaries (FWP and USFWS) (Figure 7). Boundary fencing exists on a portion of the southern and eastern edges of the property.

4.0 Predicted Environmental Consequences

4.1 Physical Environment

4.1.1 Land Resources

Proposed Action: Under the proposed action and Management Plan there would be no long-term impacts to land resources. There may be short-term, minor impacts associated with any future wetland restoration efforts associated with restoring wetlands. Continued farming practices through leases or other agreements may also cause short-term temporary impacts (dust) under windy conditions during plowing and seeding. The farming lessee will use accustomed farming practices to reduce risks of wind erosion and fertilize and rotate crops to replace soil nutrients. FWP may establish permanent ground vegetation along the edges of existing cropland fields to increase snow retention, minimize impacts to soils, and provide vegetative buffers along wetlands. FWP will not need to construct any new roads for public access to the property. FWP may need to develop vegetated or two-track roads for temporary or permanent access to restored areas and for farming. FWP will not allow any public motorized use on the property. Motorized activities will be limited to property management activities, including farming. In the future, FWP may install wildlife-friendly fences along the eastern and southern boundaries of the property. FWP may also use deer-exclusion fencing to protect newly planted vegetation. These activities will not affect the land resources.

No Action: Under the No-Action Alternative, it is likely this property would be sold to a buyer that could develop some or all of the acreage for residences. Such development would likely require soil-disturbing activities for construction of access roads and driveways, buildings, septic systems, and utility connections.

4.1.2 Air Quality

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, there would be no direct changes to the ambient air quality in the short term since land use would remain the same with seasonal crop management. However, in the long term the air quality may improve slightly if portions of the existing croplands are returned to wetlands and natural vegetation. Walk-in use by visitors is not expected to impact air quality.

No Action: Under the No-Action Alternative, the property could have the same impacts to air quality if agricultural use is continued or if subdivision occurs, construction of additional roads and structures may increase particulates in the air negatively affecting air quality.

4.1.3 Water Resources

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, initially there would be no change in water resources on the property. If wetland restoration efforts were completed, the seasonally flooded wetlands may persist longer through the summer growing season, which will enhance habitat values for waterfowl and other species.

No water rights are registered in the Montana Department of Natural Resource and Conservation Water Rights database attached to this property. If any water rights are found to exist in the future, they would be transferred to FWP and retained to benefit the conservation values of the property.

No Action: Under the No-Action Alternative, it is unknown if or how the water resources would be affected by new ownership. There may be no change to the seasonally flooded areas. If the land is developed for residential use, local groundwater resources may be impacted by construction of roads, building sites, wells, septic systems, and topographic/hydrologic changes to encourage water flow away from structures. Should the property be developed, the development may increase the potential for contamination of the ground water and Flathead Lake.

4.1.4 Vegetation

Proposed Action: Nearly all of the property is currently being farmed. In the short term, FWP will honor the existing contract between the current landowner and farmer. In exchange for this lease, the current lessee will leave food and cover plots for wildlife and manage weeds.

FWP would begin to gradually restore native vegetation along the wetlands and on some areas of existing croplands, subject to a final restoration plan and associated public environmental assessment process. FWP anticipates that the commercial farming lease will continue for at least one year after acquisition of the property. The lessee, in conjunction with FWP, will manage noxious weeds on the property. If wetland and upland restoration is implemented, the quantity and quality of native vegetation on the property is expected to improve.

No Action: The level of risk is unknown because the future impacts to the resources would be dependent on the desires of the property's new owner. Vegetation resources may be altered if a residence or multiple residences are constructed, or vegetation may stay remain essentially the same if crop production is continued and seasonal flooding is allowed at its current level. The intensity of noxious weed control by another owner is also unknown, but would be subject to the same state laws as under the proposed action.

4.1.5 Fish and Wildlife Resources

Proposed Action: If FWP were to acquire this property, it would be for the benefit of its permanent and transient terrestrial species and for aquatic or other species that use wetlands and Flathead Lake. Short term, impacts are expected to be minimal since the land would continue as cropland until the habitat restoration plans are implemented. Once wetland and other habitat restoration is implemented, it is expected that improvements in habitat values would increase the carrying capacity for waterfowl, game birds, and other wildlife species.

Hunting (primarily waterfowl and upland game bird) would be one of the allowable uses on the property, so some disturbance by legal hunting of wildlife is expected, but it will be administered under annual hunting regulations that also guide public recreational opportunities and public safety on adjoining public and private land. No hunting would be allowed during the springtime because the property would be closed to all use from March 1 through July 15 to allow for protection of resting and nesting waterfowl along Flathead Lake's north shore. Trapping may also be allowed, but would be limited by special permit. There would be seasonal closures and other limitations set by FWP based on wildlife needs and public uses as described in the Management Plan.

This addition to the WMA would be open for day-use and walk-in activities from July 16 to the end of February each year. Public uses may be restricted to certain portions of the property at times so there won't be damage to crops, newly seeded areas, or recently restored areas. This property would be closed to the public between March 1 - July 15 during bird migration and nesting seasons, which would be consistent with the seasonal closure of the federal Waterfowl Production Area and the adjoining North Shore WMA and North Shore SP/WMA. This seasonal closure would also benefit other wildlife species by minimizing public disturbances during their birthing season.

The proposed acquisition and the potential plans for enhancing of wetland habitats are consistent with the priorities for the Montana Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Conservation Strategy (2015), North American Waterfowl Management Plan (2012), the Columbia Basin Fish and Wildlife Program (ongoing), the Intermountain West Regional Shorebird Plan (2013), and the US Shorebird Plan (2000). It supports the North American Waterfowl Management Plan Implementation Framework's population and habitat objectives for priority waterfowl species by protecting important nesting and migration habitats.

In addition to contributing to the goals of the aforementioned plans, FWP's acquisition of the property would contribute to the protection and conservation of the North Shore Important Bird Area and other priority bird habitats within the Flathead Basin. The Glaciated Valleys of

Northwest Montana partnership as part of the Intermountain West Joint Venture (Intermountain West) have designated the north shore of Flathead Lake one of the 22 priority bird habitat conservation areas in the western portion of Montana in their *Coordinated Implementation Plan for Bird Conservation in Western Montana* (2004). The Intermountain West objectives for Montana are for no net loss of wetlands and protection, restoration, and/or enhancement of 292,658 acres by 2015. This project would contribute toward these goals and is consistent with the additional objective to “*emphasize projects that include associated priority upland habitat types (grassland, shrub steppe, riparian).*”

Given the level of population growth occurring in the county, the proposed acquisition would preserve a portion of habitat connectivity that currently allows wildlife to move between the Swan and Salish Mountains. Flathead County has seen a human population increase of 22% over the last decade which has lead to fragmented habitat patches.

The Flathead Valley once supported strong populations of leopard frogs as well as western toads. For many reasons, including habitat alterations, chemicals, introduced species, and disease, leopard frogs have all but disappeared from western Montana and western toad numbers have severely declined. Both of these species are Tier 1 and were common throughout the Flathead Valley in association with the Flathead River and wetland complexes. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) have successfully reintroduced leopard frogs within the reservation boundaries. FWP would like to develop a leopard frog conservation and restoration plan at some point in the future, while FWP staff continues to monitor existing populations. Reintroduction efforts on the Flathead Indian Reservation indicate more rapid metamorphosis and good survival in warmer streams and sites in the absence of spotted frogs. Permanent protection of ponds and wetlands along the north shore of Flathead Lake could help provide future reintroduction and conservation efforts for leopard frogs and/or western toads. The USFWS has been petitioned to perform a preliminary review of the status of leopard frogs in the western states.

No Action: If the property is not purchased by FWP, it may be kept in agricultural production, which would likely maintain its current wildlife habitat values. However, given the increasing population trends for Flathead County, there is the likelihood that this property would be converted to a single residence, commercial property, or subdivided into 20 acre parcels for residential development in the future. If that were to occur, wildlife habitat could be negatively impacted by the construction of homes, roads, necessary infrastructure (utilities, septic, etc.), and changes in available preferred vegetation. With such disturbances, wildlife may avoid the property entirely, looking for more suitable habitat elsewhere. Water quality impacts associated with such residential development could adversely impact important fisheries resources along the north shore of Flathead Lake and decrease water quality within the lake.

4.2 Human Environment

4.2.1 Noise and Utilities

Proposed Action: The proposed acquisition would likely result in more people visiting the new WMA over time, particularly during certain times of the year (hunting and winter seasons), thus potentially increasing the noise level within a localized area.

The federal WPA is open to fall hunting, thus seasonal increase of noise already occurs in the local area. The noise effects within and near this proposed addition are expected to be similar to those of the WPA and existing WMAs with seasonal use of shotguns. Effects of general public noise to adjoining private landowners is expected to be minimal, yet if concerns arise, FWP would evaluate the potential for changing hunting opportunities on the property in order to mitigate landowner concerns.

No Action: If another buyer purchased the property, this could result in some type of development which might cause an increase in noise both on the property and in the immediate area depending on the type or extent of development.

4.2.2 Land Use

Proposed Action: Nearly all of the property has been used for crop production for many years. This land use will continue on most of the property for at least the next growing season. As restoration occurs on the property, the acreage actively farmed for crops will gradually decrease; however, farming will continue to be an integral and important land use in the future management of the entire North Shore WMA complex. Agricultural practices will be applied in a way to provide important annual food resources and nesting cover for migratory birds and other wildlife.

Future restoration efforts may include restoring 5 to 10 acres of agricultural land to seasonally or permanently flooded wetlands and grasslands for the benefit of nesting and feeding areas for wildlife. The wetland restoration will also include adding about 10 acres of riparian woody vegetation along existing wetlands to also enhance the habitat values.

The primary access point into the property will be via the parking area at the adjacent North Shore WMA. No new access points for motor vehicles are expected to be established. Motor vehicles would be prohibited from driving into this new WMA except for FWP administrative uses and lessee/farming or legitimate subcontractor uses.

The entire property may also be used during the open season for nonprofit educational purposes through a no-cost permit from FWP or for educational purposes by FWP staff. Agricultural and restoration or other land management uses by FWP or its contractors will be allowed during the closed season only as needed.

Farming and other agricultural uses that benefit wildlife would be allowed by FWP and its lessees as described in the Management Plan. If other commercial activities were proposed or identified that would promote or benefit the conservation and resource values, it would need to be implemented consistent with FWP's Commercial Use Rules, ARM 12.14.101 *et seq.*, and Management Plan or other agreement.

No Action: If a buyer other than FWP were to acquire the property, the land use may stay the same or it could change to development with one or more additional private residences. These activities could pose threats to wildlife, vegetative resources, and ground water quality, but at what level those threats would occur is unknown and would be based on the intensity of development.

4.2.3 Risk and Health Hazards

Proposed Action: Under FWP management, herbicides/fungicides/pesticides could be used to reduce, control, or eradicate noxious weeds or other pests on the property, as per the Region One Weed Management Plan and with the approval of the County Weed District. Use of chemicals would be limited to minimum amounts and least toxic substance needed to address the issue or infestation. Trained, licensed professionals would conduct chemical treatments and storage/use of chemicals in accordance with proper operating procedures and label instructions to minimize potential unintended consequences to wildlife, vegetation, neighbors, and visitors to the property.

Inherent risks are associated with hunting and recreational activities. FWP would monitor the area for any increase in hazards and provide educational materials and law enforcement patrols to promote safe and responsible use of this property, just as the department does on its adjoining properties and how other enforcement personnel manage the neighboring federal lands. Management of new or increasing hazards could be managed by FWP through changes of allowable uses within the property, such as creating no-hunting buffers around neighboring residences or providing additional patrols by FWP wardens and working in cooperation with local law enforcement.

No Action: If FWP does not purchase the property, it is unknown if any new risk or health hazards might occur.

4.2.4 Aesthetics and Recreation

Proposed Action: FWP acquisition of this property would help protect the open space and aesthetic values along the north end of Flathead Lake that are consistent with the County Growth Policy's goal of G9 and G11. Additionally, the acquisition would be consistent with the county's designation of Highway 82 as a scenic corridor.

Recreational opportunities on the property would increase over current levels during the time when the WMA would be open (July 16 to end of February) under FWP management. Recreational uses would be managed so as not to impact wildlife, waterfowl use, and other important habitat values and would be compatible with wildlife, water quality, and habitat values of this parcel, the neighboring North Shore WMA and North Shore SP/WMA, and the federal WPA. Allowable uses would include activities such as wildlife viewing, hiking, education, fall hunting, and trapping that are consistent with the purposes of the acquisition and conservation easement.

FWP's future restoration of riparian/wetlands and uplands would increase habitat diversity on the site. This may add to enjoyment of users; it may also change the views of Flathead Lake and the surrounding mountains. However, much of the property will remain in agricultural production so that views from the highway will remain similar to what they are today.

FWP would install informational and regulation signage to help minimize trespass, vandalism, and resource damages, and hopefully reduce risks or rates of potential violations. If persistent violations occur or resources are damaged, FWP would evaluate the need to adjust rules, increase security or enforcement, or restrict allowable uses on the property to decrease resource impacts.

If user conflicts arise, FWP would also evaluate the needs of the users and make adjustments in the rules or the allowable uses consistent with the purpose of the acquisition and conservation easement.

No Action: Changes in ownership may result in changes to the natural areas, area aesthetics, and recreation opportunities depending on desires of a new landowner. If the area remained in agricultural land uses, the scenic and aesthetic values would be maintained at their current level.

4.2.5 Public Services, Taxes, and Community Impacts

Proposed Action: With the proposed acquisition, FWP would become responsible for payment of property taxes to Flathead County. Taxes paid in 2014 were approximately \$700.

The existing workload of the regional FWP wildlife management and enforcement programs would likely increase with this acquisition. The increased workload would be partially absorbed by existing staff with specialized work to be contracted out. Some of the ongoing land management duties will be the responsibility of the farming lessee.

Increased public recreational activities on the property could also result in occasional need for emergency services such as search and rescue, emergency medical services, local law enforcement, and fire control and suppression. The property would remain within the jurisdiction of the Bigfork Emergency Response District and the Somers Fire District; however, the Montana Department of Natural Resources typically provides fire suppression coverage for FWP-owned properties.

FWP anticipates use this property to be approximately 150 hunter days per year and 300 wildlife-viewing days. These additional days of use may translate into increased expenditures by hunters and wildlife viewers in the area for fuel, equipment, food, etc., in Somers or other nearby communities.

The proposed acquisition would support 8 of the 49 goals set forth in the Flathead County Growth Plan that focus on preserving aesthetic values (i.e., open spaces and wildlife habitat) of the county for the benefit of residents and visitors, protecting water resources, protecting important fish and wildlife habitat, protecting wetlands and riparian areas, and preservation of the character of rural areas.

No Action: There would be no change under the No Action alternative to public services, taxes, or the community if another buyer purchased the property and continued to farm it. However, if another buyer purchased the property and converted it from agricultural use to residential use, Flathead County could receive increased tax revenues, but with any new development the county would also experience increased demand for public services to the location for new residences. However, the exact public service and utility needs of another buyer is unknown. There may be potential for a short-term economic benefit through some type of development and additional home housing construction or real estate sales if the property is sold to a developer for subdivision, but they may be offset by increased cost of public services.

4.2.6 Cultural and Historic Resources

Proposed Action: There are no known cultural resources on the property and so there will be no impacts to these resources under the Proposed Action.

No Action: The No Action alternative will also have no impacts to cultural or historic resources.

4.3 Cumulative Effects

The acquisition of this property by FWP would contribute to the preservation and restoration of upland habitat as well as riparian and wetland areas for the benefit of wildlife species along the north shore of Flathead Lake, in conjunction with ongoing habitat restoration and preservation efforts at the adjacent North Shore WMA and North Shore WMA/SP as well as the federal WPA. The proposed project will also help maintain the viewshed and open space of the north shore of Flathead Lake and protect water quality within the lake.

5.0 Need for an Environmental Impact Statement

Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? No.

The proposed acquisition would affect approximately 76 acres in perpetuity. Important riparian and wetlands would be protected and restored for the benefit of waterfowl and other wildlife species and the property would be available and open seasonally to the public.

This environmental assessment revealed no significant (negative or positive) impacts from the proposed action and identified a very limited number of minor impacts from the proposed action. The significance criteria described in Montana Administrative Rule 12.2.431 were used in this determination. Based upon the above assessment, an EIS is not required and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of review.

6.0 Public Participation

6.1 Public Involvement

Public notification of the EA release and opportunities to comment will be by:

- A statewide press release.
- Two legal notices in each of the local papers: the *Bigfork Eagle*, and Kalispell's *Daily Inter Lake*, and *Flathead Beacon*.
- Direct mailing to adjacent landowners and interested parties.
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page:
<http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/environmentalAssessments/acquisitionsTradesAndLeases>
- An e-mail to elected officials, governmental agencies, and tribes.
- **A project presentation/public hearing will be held on November 24, 2015 beginning at 6:30 pm at the Somers Middle School located at 315 School Addition Road, Somers, MT.**

Copies of this EA will be available for public review at FWP Region One headquarters in Kalispell; the libraries in Bigfork, Kalispell, and Lakeside; the Montana State Library in Helena; and on the FWP web site:

<http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/environmentalAssessments/acquisitionsTradesAndLeases/>

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope, having few and limited physical and human impacts.

6.2 Comment Period

The public comment period will extend for 30 days beginning November 6, 2015. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., December 5, 2015, and can be mailed to the address below:

North Shore WMA Proposed Addition
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region One Headquarters
490 N. Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

or e-mail comments to: Nancy Ivy at nivy@mt.gov

6.3 Approximate Timeline of Events

Public comment period	November 6 – December 5, 2015
Decision notice published	December 2015
Project submitted to Commission (if Alternative A is recommended)	January 2016
Project submitted to Montana Land Board	January 2016

6.4 Offices & Programs Contributing to the Document

Montana State Historic Preservation Office, Helena, MT

7.0 EA Preparers

Kris Tempel, FWP Resource Specialist, Kalispell, MT
Alan Wood, FWP Wildlife Mitigation Coordinator, Kalispell, MT
Candace Durran, FWP Lands Agent, Helena, MT

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Appendix A

North Shore Wildlife Management Area Proposed Addition Draft Management Plan

A. Introduction

This Management Plan (Plan) for the North Shore Wildlife Management Area (WMA) proposed addition describes Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks's (FWP) objectives and goals for the 76-acre property located in Flathead County about 4 miles east of Somers, Montana, and about 3/4 mile west of Sportsman's Bridge along U.S. Highway 82 (Figure 1). If FWP decides to buy this property, and receives permission from the Fish and Wildlife Commission and the Land Board, this plan would guide future activities on this new portion of the WMA. The property borders the North Shore Wildlife Management Area (WMA) which also borders the North Shore State Park (SP)/Wildlife Management Area (WMA) to the west, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Flathead lake Waterfowl Production Area's (WPA) access road to the east, the Bigfork-Somers cutoff road (U.S. Highway 82) to the north, and private lands to the north and south and (Figure 2). The property is located in Section 22 T27N R20W, Flathead County.

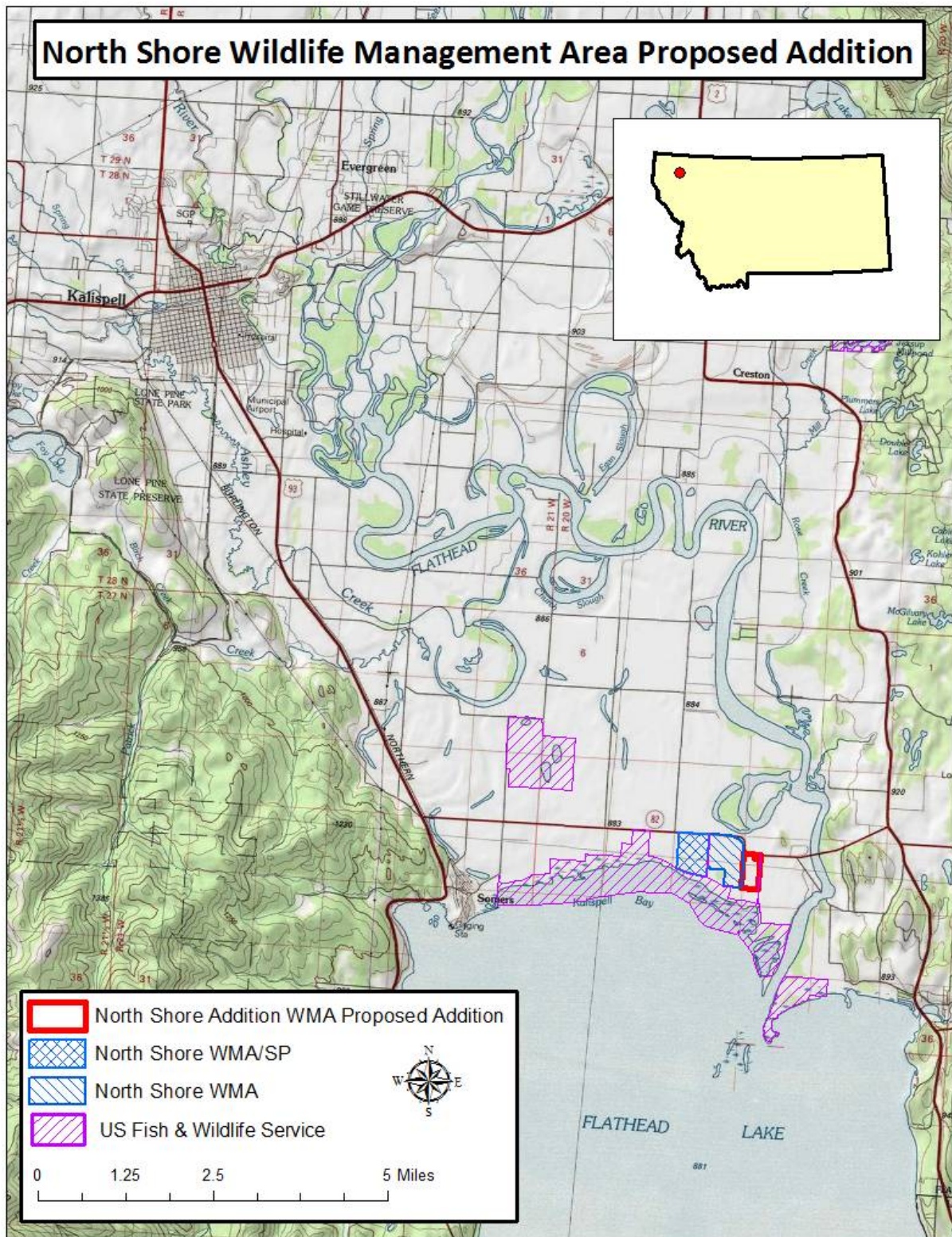


Figure 1. General location of the North Shore WMA proposed addition along the north shore of Flathead Lake, between Somers and Bigfork, MT.

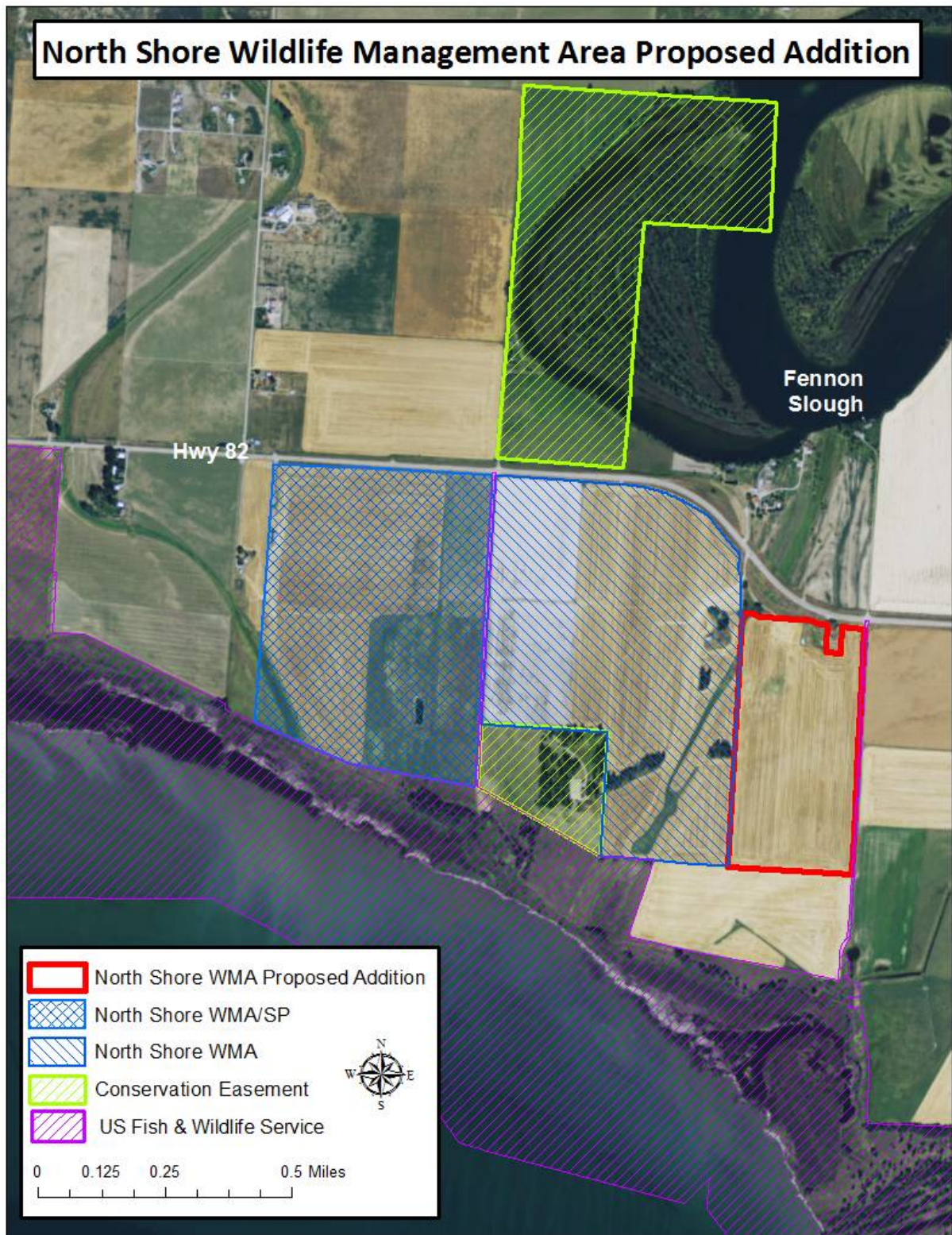


Figure 2. Aerial photo of the proposed land acquisition and the adjacent land ownership along Highway 82 and the north shore of Flathead Lake.

Funding for the Project/Encumbrances

This property will be purchased using Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act funds with the goal of protecting and managing this land to restore or improve natural riparian/wetland habitats, to continue annual crop production to benefit resident and migratory waterfowl, to improve and maintain habitat for other wildlife, and to provide opportunities for seasonal and compatible public recreation. This project also protects ground water, surface water, and wetlands on or near Flathead Lake which will help improve or maintain the high water quality of Flathead Lake for benefits of aquatic life and fish and wildlife habitat. This plan is written to guide future management actions so as to be consistent with the rules and regulations that govern FWP's land management programs.

Montana Environmental Policy Act/National Environmental Policy Act

Under Montana law, FWP must prepare a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) that describes the proposed land acquisition along with a proposed Management Plan and the environmental effects of the proposed action, viable alternatives, and no-action alternatives. FWP plans to release its draft EA for public review and comment in November 2015 and hold a public hearing during the 30-day comment period. Following the draft EA, the Region would issue a decision notice and, assuming the decision was to move the project forward, the project and all public information would be sent to the Fish and Wildlife Commission and State Land Board for final approvals.

Management Plan Updates

This Management Plan will be periodically updated and amended over time to ensure that property management continues to fulfill the identified purpose(s) as the operating environment, ecological processes, or funding changes over time. Future updates that propose significant changes will include a process to involve the public as well as nearby and adjoining landowners through Montana's Environmental Policy Act or similar mechanism. Management of this area will be responsive pertinent scientific and cultural information, public needs, and other considerations such as impacts to neighboring properties.

Relationship of this project to the adjoining North Shore WMA and North Shore SP/WMA

FWP acquired the adjoining 189-acre North Shore WMA in 2013 using Bonneville Power Administration fisheries habitat mitigation funds and the 160-acre North Shore SP/WMA in 2008 using Access Montana funds approved by the Montana legislature for the purpose of increasing public recreational access across the state. The North Shore WMA is managed by Region One Fish and Wildlife staff to provide food and cover for migratory birds and to protect and restore wetlands. The North Shore SP/WMA is managed by Region One Parks and Wildlife staff to also provide food and cover for migratory birds and protect and restore wetlands, but may also potentially be managed to provide public camping at some point in the future. Management of all three parcels will be integrated and designed to be compatible with one another as well as with the other adjoining private and public lands.

Authority

FWP is authorized through Montana Code Annotated (87-1-209, MCA) to acquire lands for purchase for the purpose of wildlife and/or fisheries protection, fishing, hunting, outdoor recreation, and/or to consolidate lands for these purposes, with the approval of the Fish and Wildlife Commission and the Board of Land Commissioners. FWP is authorized to acquire lands by purchase, gift, or other agreement, or acquire easements upon lands or waters for certain purposes, including public fishing and outdoor recreation (MCA 87-1-209).

B. Property History and Conditions

History:

From the late 1800s through present day, this property has primarily been in crop/hay production with some evidence of seasonal grazing on parts of the land. Aerial photos from 1937 indicate that nearly all of the native habitats were already converted to agricultural land uses, as was the case for most of the north shore area of Flathead Lake.

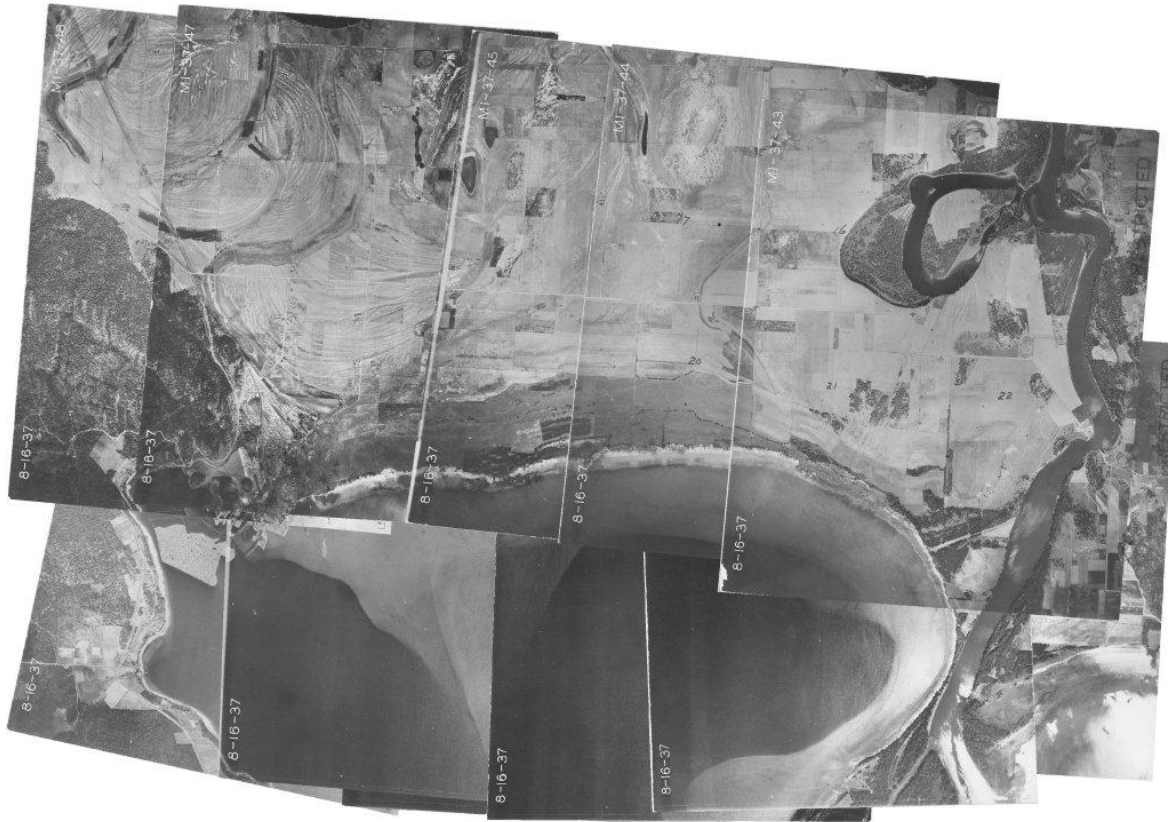


Figure 3. *The 1937 aerial photo mosaic of north shore of Flathead Lake.*

C. Property Description/Location

Land Uses, Cover Types, Elevations

The North Shore WMA proposed addition consists of approximately 76 total acres, nearly all of which are currently in annual crop production except for one seasonally wet area and one area that contains one 10'x12' wood frame shed and one 10'x16' pole shed which has two sets of corrals attached to it (Figure 4). All of the property lies roughly between 2,890 and 2,902 feet in elevation and is relatively level.



Figure 4. Existing land uses on the North Shore WMA proposed addition.

Existing Vegetation

About 74 acres of land have been continually tilled for crops such as peas, wheat, barley, and canola (Figure 4). There is a small seasonal wetland on the property in the northwest corner.

Noxious weeds such as Canada thistle and hounds tongue can be found along the edges of the property and near the wetland area.

Water Resources and Wetlands

This property overlies shallow (2 to 10) ground water and includes about 1 acre of existing wetland habitat that is seasonally wet. Water levels immediately to the west on the North Shore WMA and SP/WMA are never more than 4.5 feet below ground level throughout the year.

In the spring, the lower portion of the farm field, as well as wetland area, are flooded, particularly when local snow depths are high and persistent and/or there is a significant spring rain and runoff (Figure 5). Soil descriptions and well data from the adjacent FWP properties indicate the ground water may also be within 2-4 feet from the surface during most of the growing season. This high ground water along with changes in topography may also contribute to seasonal spring flooding.



Figure 5. Aerial view of the property in 2014 showing areas that have surface water throughout the spring and early summer.

Wildlife

The north shore of Flathead Lake provides many important and unique natural resource values from important migratory bird habitat to excellent hunting and other recreational values. The wetlands help store and maintain high water quality in Flathead Lake, one of the clearest lakes in the world. They also provide a buffer between the agricultural lands and the lake. The property's wetlands and often the agricultural lands, depending on crop species and degree of flooding, provide seasonally important foraging and resting areas for thousands of migratory birds moving through intermountain valleys of the Northern Rockies. Based on prior spring surveys, the most abundant species include Canada goose, mallard, northern pintail, American wigeon, and green-winged teal. Other species

observed near the property include greater yellowlegs, tundra swans, and sandhill cranes. A bald eagle nest is located adjacent to this property. Other species that may use this land include nesting and wintering raptors such as northern harrier, red-tailed hawk, great-horned owl, rough-legged hawk, occasional snowy and short-eared owls. Peregrine and prairie falcons have also been observed in the area. The croplands and nearby cattails also provide foraging habitat for upland game birds such as ring-necked pheasants and Hungarian partridge. The neighboring ponderosa pine stands would provide habitat for brown creeper, pileated and other woodpeckers, black-capped chickadee, white- and red-breasted nuthatches and several other species of neotropical migrants.

Flathead Lake's north shore is also an important area of connectivity across the Flathead Valley. Over the years, landowners have reported elk, mountain lions, and bears in this area. Grizzly bears have been observed nearby along the Flathead River and sloughs. Given the level of development occurring in the Flathead, this may eventually be one of the few areas of connectivity that would allow wildlife to potentially move between the Swan and Salish Mountains.

Montana Audubon North Shore Important Bird Area

Montana Audubon Society has designated the entire north shore of Flathead Lake area (between Somers and Bigfork) as an Important Bird Area (IBA). This designed Flathead Lake IBA includes the North Shore WMA. Key reasons include high bird diversity with a minimum of 229 different species known to occur within the IBA; of these, 172 are regular visitors, common, or seasonally abundant. Key species include nesting northern harriers, short-eared owls, willow flycatchers, calliope and rufous hummingbirds, and lazuli buntings. The north shore regularly supports over ten thousand migratory waterfowl including high priority species such as northern pintails as well as American wigeon, mallard, tundra swan, and Canada goose. Offshore habitats are important during winter and spring for redhead, greater and lesser scaup, canvasback, and common loons. More recently, the North Shore IBA provides resting and wintering area for a recovered population of trumpeter swans that have expanded from releases in the Mission Valley to the upper Flathead Valley. The area also supports at least 4 bald eagle territories and is an important nesting/resting area for American avocets, Wilson's phalarope, black-bellied plover, long-billed dowitcher, and greater yellowlegs.

The north shore area holds value not only as habitat for birds, but as an important site for ecotourism/birding. Unusual or rare species seen here in the past 25 years include parasitic jaeger and Sabine's, Thayer's, glaucous, glaucous-winged, Iceland and mew gulls (now annual, the only place in Montana where this is the case); American golden-plover, whimbrel, Pacific loon (annual); and alder flycatcher, gyrfalcon, and snowy owl.

The riparian/wetland habitat associated with the adjacent North Shore WMA's slough provides habitat for upland game birds, a variety of spring/fall migrating waterfowl, nesting Canada goose and mallard, a variety of song birds, white-tailed deer, northern harrier, red-tailed hawks, wintering rough-legged hawks, great-horned owls, and occasionally wintering snowy owls, to mention a few. Most of the 76-acre property is currently in crop production and provides foraging habitat for raptors, upland game birds such as ring-necked pheasants and Hungarian partridge, and seasonally large numbers of migratory waterfowl such as tundra swan, Canada goose, American wigeon, mallard, and northern pintail.

Recreation

The north shore of Flathead Lake has little development, provides excellent views of the Flathead Lake and lakeshore, and provides excellent birdwatching and fall bird hunting opportunities. There is a significant demand for public access to agricultural and waterfront lands within the valley both by wildlife watchers and by hunters. There are few public places where the public can hunt waterfowl or

upland game birds other than the Flathead Lake, Blasdel, and Smith Lake WPAs. This addition will help provide needed hunting opportunities, particularly as habitat values are improved. Flathead Lake WPA is used heavily by hikers, skiers, and birdwatchers from December-March 1 when the lake is low, the beaches are exposed, and the WPA is open for public use. Access to the beach portion of the WPA is already provided by the FWS. It is not likely this property would be used that much in the winter after the close of all hunting seasons. Trespass issues on the WPA and beach areas after March 1 are increasing and that could spill over to the WMA.

Birdwatchers have suggested this property or other nearby areas might be a good place to put a bird observation structure or blind. Much of the north shore from Flathead River to Somers could be seen by an elevated structure placed near the WPA. Such a structure could be used by researchers to observe or count birds along the north shore and by educators leading field trips. Seasonal public use should be compatible with both land management and habitat goals and objectives.

Flathead County's Master Trails Plan

(http://flathead.mt.gov/parks_rec/documents/FlatheadCountyTrailsPlan.pdf) includes the goal of developing a bike/pedestrian trail from Bigfork to Somers along Highway 82. The Montana Department of Transportation is currently developing a plan to replace the Flathead River Sportsmans Bridge, located a mile east of this property that will include a bike/pedestrian lane. If or when the rest of this trail is constructed, it will most likely be proposed along the north edge of this property to facilitate access to public lands and for aesthetic, educational, and wildlife-viewing values. Nonmotorized use of a public trail along the property boundary and highway would be consistent with the purpose of the property acquisition.

D. Proposed Management Plan

FWP recognizes that this property:

- Overlies many acres of high groundwater connected to Flathead Lake and other wetlands and is important to maintaining clean water and high water quality in Flathead Lake.
- The riparian/wetland habitat on this property can be restored and/or enhanced significantly.
- Nearly 100% of this property is composed of prime agricultural soils that are highly productive and important for crop production in the Flathead Valley.
- Agricultural crops such as wheat and barley provide an important food resource for migratory waterfowl that move through the Flathead in the spring and fall, as well as for upland game birds and other wildlife species.
- The entire north shore of Flathead Lake, including this property, is an important area for birdwatching, hunting, scenic views, outdoor education, and provides needed recreational opportunities for the local public as well as visitors.

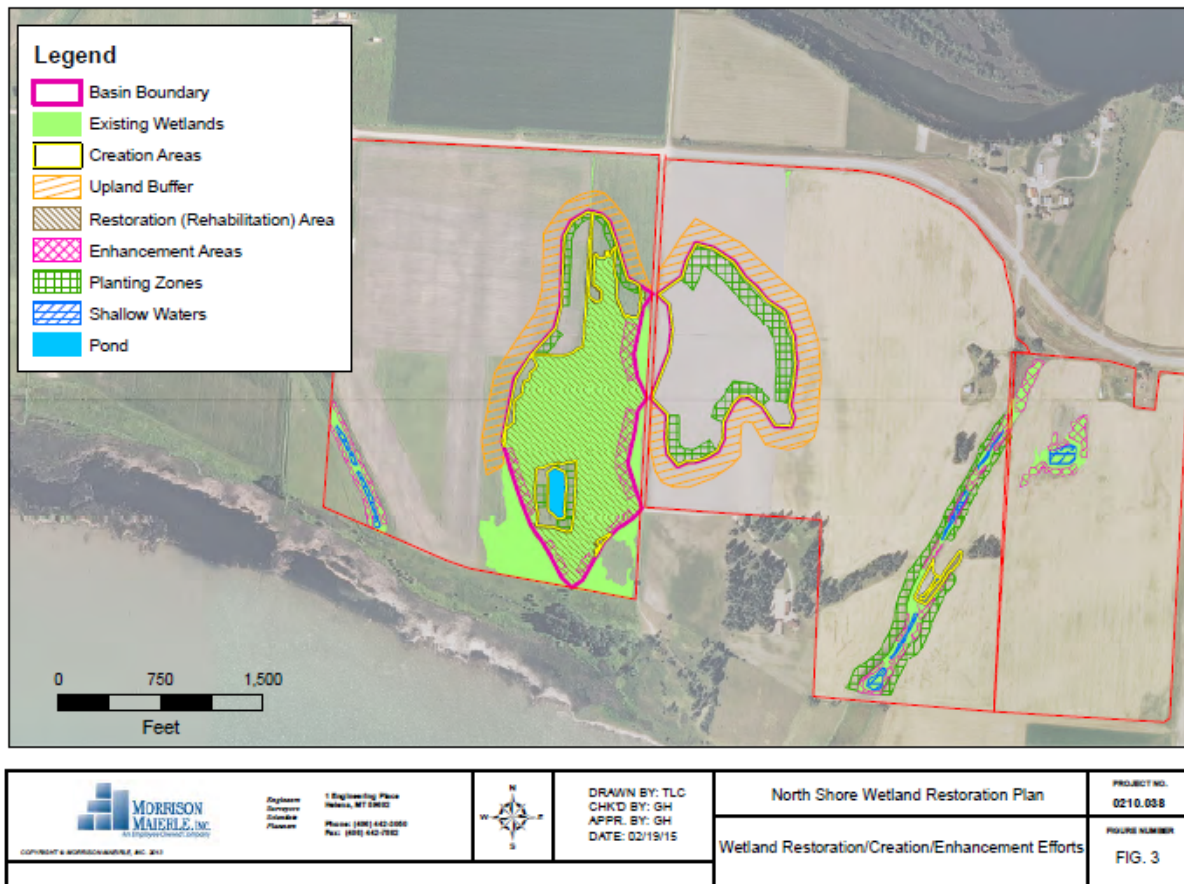


Figure 7. A potential restoration plan for the North Shore SP/WMA, the North Shore WMA, and this parcel (if acquired by FWP) that was developed by Morrison-Maierle, Inc in 2015.

Overall Objectives: The management objectives of the North Shore WMA proposed addition are to:

1. Conserve, maintain, restore, and enhance riparian/wetland habitats to maintain and improve ecological functions and provide additional wildlife habitat and species benefits.
2. Maintain/enhance and potentially expand native upland habitat with native understory for nesting birds.
3. Protect the property's surface and ground water to benefit water quality in Flathead Lake and on-site aquatic ecosystem.
4. Use/manage agricultural lands in a manner that provides a variety of wildlife habitats and improves wetlands or water quality.
5. Allow seasonal public hunting, birdwatching and other consistent uses.
6. Provide educational opportunities consistent with the above objectives that do not negatively impact wildlife resources, habitat values, or other related resource management activities.
7. Be a "good neighbor" to adjoining properties and neighboring communities, and contribute to the local economy.

Strategies by Objective

Objective 1: Conserve, maintain, restore, and enhance riparian/wetland habitat to maintain and improve ecological functions and provide additional wildlife habitat and species benefits.

Management Strategies:

- a) Consider using the wetland restoration plan developed by Morrison-Maeriele, Inc. to restore wetlands and upland areas where appropriate.
- b) Identify factors affecting wetlands, such as fill, drainage, roads, other human alterations, invasive species, etc.
- c) Coordinate riparian/wetland habitat activities with adjoining FWP properties and landowners and other interested parties to both avoid potential adverse impacts to neighboring properties or to expand restoration benefits on properties with similar management goals.
- d) Establish natural/native vegetative buffers along existing wetlands through planting native shrubs and trees and other beneficial plant species.
- e) Manage noxious weeds to prevent spread and reduce impacts to native species and declines in plant community productivity.
- f) Work with partners with expertise and/or financial resources that may be willing to help with habitat restoration and management.

Objective 2: Maintain/enhance and possibly gradually expand native upland habitat with native understory for nesting birds.

Management Strategies:

- a) Manage weeds and other invasive species without impacting integrity of existing or future native communities.
- b) Coordinate weed management with adjoining landowners and others active in local weed management efforts.
- c) Consider planting other sites on the property where native upland communities could be expanded or restored.
- d) Add native shrubs and herbaceous understory species that are absent but were historically present on the property.

Objective 3: Protect the property's surface and ground water to benefit water quality in Flathead Lake and on-site aquatic ecosystem.

Management Strategies:

- a) Obtain best available information regarding surface and ground water as part of the planning process so that these resources can be protected.
- b) Obtain relevant information from local farmers and landowners to understand soils and history of water and drainage issues of this parcel and surrounding lands.
- c) Protect or improve surface and ground water quality from agricultural or other runoff through wetland restoration, enhancement, and vegetative buffers.
- d) Minimize use of herbicides or other chemicals near water or over shallow groundwater.

Objective 4: Use/manage agricultural lands in a manner that provides a variety of wildlife habitats and improves wetlands or water quality.

Management Strategies:

- a) FWP would assume a preexisting farm lease on the property that allows the current lessee to farm the property through 2016. In return for this lease, the lessee will leave 30% of the cropland acres of wildlife food plots, prepare the area for riparian restoration as appropriate, and control noxious weeds on the property.
- b) FWP would gradually decrease the amount of land managed as cropland as habitat restoration projects are implemented as described in this Management Plan.
- c) Implement rotation farm plan for the remaining agricultural lands that provides wildlife habitat such as grain, winter cover, and nesting cover in a way that also returns nitrogen and other plant materials to the soil.
- d) Use the least amount of chemicals required for weed or pest control and the least amount of fertilizer.
- e) Manage lands to attract wildlife use and discourage game damage or other unwanted wildlife impacts to adjoining lands.
- f) Control noxious weeds and invasive species in a manner that minimizes impacts to native vegetation and water quality.
- g) Coordinate weed and other land management activities with adjoining landowners and others active in local weed management efforts.

Objective 5: Allow seasonal public hunting, wildlife watching, and other consistent uses, with provisions and restrictions appropriate for safety.

Management Strategies:

- a) The designated parking area for public access is located on the adjoining North Shore WMA just off of Highway 82. Access for the public for both parcels will be walk in only from that point.
- b) Develop appropriate signage, regulatory postings, and educational messages related to public safety.
- c) Public use of the property is restricted to non-motorized access, which would be available between July 16 to the end of February each year for purposes consistent with the objectives of the WMA (e.g., hunting, wildlife viewing, birdwatching, and education).
- d) Use signs and fences to limit public use where land is undergoing restoration or being actively farmed until crops have been harvested to reduce damage to fragile resources or croplands.
- e) Coordinate public access rules with the USFWS Flathead Lake Waterfowl Production Area and consistent with the existing WMAs to reduce confusion, conflicting rules, and overall public use complexity.
- f) Restrict vehicles/OHV use to access road and designated parking area only during the time when the property is open to public use.
- g) Discharge of firearms and weapons will be restricted to lawful hunting only. Recreational shooting and target practice is prohibited (ARM 12.8.202). No person may permit an animal to run at-large except when involved in designated hunting seasons. Persons in possession of animals must keep them under control in a manner that does not cause or permit a nuisance, annoyance, or danger to others.
- h) Manage hunting in accordance with annual regulations.
- i) Indicate on maps safety buffers around adjoining private landowner residence.

- j) Allow use of portable bird blinds for hunting or noncommercial photography. No permanent blinds or pits would be allowed.
- k) Commercial activities are prohibited unless authorized FWP through the commercial use rules (FWP Commercial Use Rule - ARM 12.14.101-12.14.170) and any special regulations developed for this property.
- l) Manage all public uses consistent with appropriate FWP recreational use regulations (ARM 12.8.101-12.8.213) and Commission Rules.
- m) Other uses such as group use, commercial use, scientific research, and projects involving handling wildlife will require special permits.
- n) Provide adequate law enforcement patrol and response presence on the site through the use of game wardens, and fish and wildlife division personnel, as well as law enforcement for USFWS.
- o) No fires would be allowed.
- p) During the fire season, FWP attends weekly fire conferences with county, state, and federal entities to discuss the current fire danger and assess appropriate actions relative to potential fire restrictions. These restrictions may include closure of the site to public use.

Objective 6: Provide wildlife/habitat-related educational and research opportunities consistent with the above objectives that do not negatively impact wildlife resources and habitat values.

Management Strategies:

- a) Investigate the suitability of developing a bird observation blind/area on the property for educational or scientific purposes, including consideration of potential negative impacts on wildlife or habitat values.
- b) Require teachers/educators/researchers to obtain a special use permit from FWP Regional Office to ensure uses are compatible, safe, and consistent with the purposes of the conservation easement and WMA.
- c) Consider providing an educational board or materials at the site that describe this area's natural, historic, or culturally important values.

Objective 7: Be a "good neighbor" to adjoining properties and neighboring communities and contribute to the local economy.

Management Strategies:

- a) Work with adjoining landowners, local farmers, and others on issues of mutual importance such as public use, trespass, access, weeds, ground and surface water and restoration benefits/concerns, wildlife damage, etc.
- b) Develop and implement noxious weed program.
- c) Provide cost-share contracts following state purchasing procedures to allow farmers to plant and harvest approved crops in exchange for leaving specified grain, cover, or other wildlife benefits and managing weeds, fences or other infrastructure needs.

Administration, Operations, and Maintenance

First Year (2016)

FWP would continue current land management activities during 2016 following acquisition of the parcel. As part of the negotiated property sale, FWP would allow the current farming contract to continue on the land for one growing season following the acquisition. In return, the farmer would leave grain for migratory birds and take care of noxious weeds.

Management Strategies:

- a) Walk-in use will be allowed annually from July 16 to the end of February, except on areas undergoing native plant restoration, or on actively farmed lands until the crop is harvested.
- b) FWP will follow appropriate purchasing regulations and develop a proposal for multi-year cost-share farming agreement to be put in place by fall 2016.
- c) FWP will contract for noxious weed management for the nonagricultural lands if or when not covered in the agricultural lease contract.
- d) FWP may implement restoration of this property in concert with restoration on the adjoining North Shore WMA and North Shore SP/WMA in a manner similar to the plan shown in Figure 7. This plan may morph over time based on results of incremental restoration projects, and as FWP becomes more familiar with this new property. Any future restoration will be the subject of further environmental review.